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## THE MEDIÆVAL POPULAR BALLAD\*

Steenstrup's *Vore Folkeviser fra Middelalderen* was published in 1891, nearly twenty-five years ago. It was promptly recognized in the Old World as an important contribution to the study of the ballad; but in America, until this translation appeared last year, Steenstrup's work remained, like the work of most Danish scholars, unknown or inaccessible by reason of our academic neglect of the Scandinavian languages. How many Americans, even in college, have any opportunity to learn Swedish or Danish? It is to be hoped that the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study, organized quietly in the Middle West a few years ago, will soon bring American colleges to a realization of the wealth of learning and ideas from which we shut ourselves out by our disregard of these tongues. In the meantime we are grateful to all who, like Professor Cox, help to make this treasure accessible to us.

The translator in his Preface compares Steenstrup's work on the Danish ballads with Professor Gummere's upon the ballads of our own language. The likenesses and the differences are alike striking. The great critical edition of the Danish ballads begun by Svend Grundtvig in 1853 afforded the model, even to the number of volumes planned and to details of annotation and *format*, for the corresponding work of Professor Child of which American scholarship is so justly proud. But Child's work, of which the first instalment appeared nearly thirty years later (1882), was completed in sixteen years, the last number having been issued by Professor Kittredge in 1898, two years after Child's death; while *Danmarks Gamle Folkeviser*, of which Grundtvig published the fourth volume in the year of his death (1883), was continued by Dr. Axel Olrik through five volumes more, and was finished only eight years ago. In 1893 Professor Gummere began his work of theoretical comment in a course of lectures delivered at Johns Hopkins, the substance of which was

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\**The Mediæval Popular Ballad*. Translated from the Danish of Johannes C. H. R. Steenstrup by Edward Godfrey Cox. Boston: Ginn & Co.

published in his *Old English Ballads* (1894), and he has continued it in *The Beginnings of Poetry* (1901), *The Popular Ballad* (1907), and a number of special articles. Steenstrup's comment on the Danish ballads was given first as a series of lectures at the University of Copenhagen in 1886-7, and published four years later. A subsequent controversial article on "Historical Truth in Ballad Poetry" (1907) is incorporated by Professor Cox in his translation. Furthermore, Steenstrup and Gummere have the same general purpose: to explain and define the genuine ballad. But their method and temper are widely different. Professor Gummere seeks a formula for the ballad *an sich*, a doctrine of its genesis and its social psychology; he proceeds evolutionally, not to say metaphysically, and rakes for evidence even Siberia and the Australian aborigines. Steenstrup's programme is much less ambitious and his method more concrete. He endeavors "to discover what our Danish ballads of the Middle Ages were like originally, and to determine their proper form and subject matter." To this end he studies, in the ballads of Grundtvig's collection (the whole of which, not merely the volumes published up to 1891, were at his disposal), the relation of the ballad to the dance, the use of the pronoun of the first person, the form and function of the refrain, the verse form, the subject-matter and style, and the degree and kind of historic truth to be found in the ballads.

Danish ballads differ from English ballads in that they are more clearly dance songs. Not that people dance to them now in Denmark; indeed, most of the versions in *Danmarks Gamle Folkeviser* are from manuscript ballad-books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and versions current in the nineteenth century in Denmark seem to have been merely sung, just as ballads are at the present time in America. But many of these same ballads are still danced to in the Faroe Islands, where archaic conditions still obtain; and, moreover, the Danish ballads themselves, especially in the refrains, make descriptive mention of the dance in a way that leaves no doubt that the ballads were used as dance music. Steenstrup finds evidence in the ballads of the way in which the dance was performed. It was a ring- or chain-dance, hand in hand, with a simple and dig-

nified step, under the direction of a leader or fore-dancer—no doubt the same in all essentials as that described by Thuren in his work on the Faroe ballads. There were besides special dances, the ruder *Skikke-Rei* and the beggar dance, whose character is not so clear.

Although one would expect poetry to which people danced to be lyrical in quality, Danish ballads are in their content consistently narrative—even more consistently so than English ballads. They have little room for reflection or for the lyric cry of the self-conscious poet. Like the English ballads, they are commonly dramatic in method, and therefore make great use of dialogue; but the poet is not himself a party to the dialogue. The introduction of the poet speaking in his own person, as in the occasional opening “A ballad will I sing to you,” the stop-gap line “This I say to you in sooth” found in a good many places, the moralizing conclusion “May God in Heaven His grace us send!” and the like, is for Steenstrup evidence of a late, and in some cases a foreign (German) influence. “We may safely affirm,” he says, “that no genuine popular ballad begins with the announcement that the singer will now sing a ballad.” The grounds of this judgment are mostly critical and stylistic, though the author makes use when it serves his purpose of historical evidence, such as the date of record of a version. In connection with the latter it should be noted that these uses of the first person are to be found in the earliest manuscripts, whose age (about 1550) is in other connections alleged in support of the genuineness of versions found in them. As a matter of fact it is impossible, by the evidence of manuscripts that go back only to the middle of the sixteenth century, to establish a stylistic distinction between genuine ballads of the Middle Ages (a term which seems to mean for Steenstrup the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries) and those of the Renaissance and Reformation period.

Apart from the refrain — of which more presently — exceptions to the law which forbids the poet to obtrude himself upon the action are found chiefly in the opening stanzas. Most of these are more apparent than real. No. 75, for example, begins:—

I heard a knight in my lady's bower,  
And they were seated at play;  
Of gold the tables and red gold the dice,  
And he wooed the maiden gay.

This is merely a way of getting started; the poet has nothing to do with the story that follows. Another apparent exception is the practice, not altogether rare in Danish and familiar to American students in *Barbara Allen* and *The Butcher Boy*, of beginning a ballad in the first person as a narrative of the singer's own experience and passing presently without warning to the third person. Although Steenstrup does his best to throw out as spurious ballads or stanzas or lines in which the singer speaks of himself, this practice of beginning the story in the first person is too frequent, and occurs in ballads whose themes and style are in other respects of too marked a ballad quality, to be rejected. There is "no other alternative possible than to regard it as a peculiarity inherent in popular poetry and in artless methods of singing." The third person narrative is, he holds, the older form; that in the first person the exception, from which the singer soon withdraws to the modestly impersonal 'he' and 'she.' As a matter of fact this use of the 'I' is not really personal of the poet at all, but merely dramatic; and it would be at least as reasonable to assume, in dance songs that must have had at the start an appreciable dramatic element, that the first person was the earlier form, giving way, as the epic element in the ballads more and more asserted itself, to the third person. This chapter, interesting as it is, is somewhat clouded by the author's failure to distinguish clearly between the lyric expression of one's own feelings and the dramatic assumption of a character. Children, the least self-conscious portion of humanity, turn instinctively to dramatic assumption of characters, as has often been observed.

Another difference between English and Danish ballads is that in the latter a refrain is the rule, not the exception. Of the more than five hundred Danish ballads there are only about twenty without a refrain, and most of these are under suspicion as late, bookish, or of German origin. In the manuscripts from which Grundtvig's collection is chiefly drawn the refrain is

typically a single line, often in a different measure from the rest of the ballad, written after the first stanza and after the last. But a double refrain, like that in Child's B version of *Leesome Brand*, is not uncommon, and there is even found a triple refrain, as in No. 278, *Peter and Malfred*:—

Sir Peter mounts and and rides away.  
*While the cuckoo calls*  
 He meets a woman who greets his good-day.  
*Upon the balcony walls*  
*In the tower Malfred is weeping, in the grove she is sorrowing.*

This is very close to the manner of singing a version of *The Twa Sisters* known in Missouri:—

There was an old man in the north countree  
*Bow down!*  
 There was an old man in the north countree  
*And a bow 'twas unto me.*  
 There was an old man in the north countree,  
 And he had daughters one, two, three  
*I'll be true to my love if my love will be true to me.*

Very common, too, is a short refrain followed by a repetition of the preceding line and a half of the ballad, thus:—

Memering was the smallest man  
 That ever was born in King Karl's land.  
*My fairest maidens.*  
  
 The smallest man  
 That ever was born in King Karl's land.  
 Even before he saw the light  
 His clothes already for him were dight.  
*My fairest maidens*  
  
 He saw the light, [etc.]

So the lines are grouped in *Danmarks Gamle Folkeviser*, and presumably in the manuscripts; Steenstrup, perhaps more correctly, groups them so as to bring the refrain into the middle of the stanza. Steenstrup, who holds that originally there were, or might be, two fore-singers, believes that in such forms as this they alternated in the repeated part; also that in the case of the three-part refrain the second or assistant fore-singer sang the first two parts of the refrain and the chorus the third part. In view of the fact that the Faroe folk know but a single fore-singer

who is at the same time the leader of the dance, and that the triple refrain needs no such division of labor in Missouri at the present time, this seems an unnecessary assumption, though it is naturally enough suggested by what we know of the way the Finns render the songs of the *Kalevala*.

In content the refrain is sometimes, especially in the historical ballads, a sort of summary of the story; for example, in No. 30, which has the refrain "Holger Dansk has overthrown Burmand." More often it is a lyrical or reflective expression of the feeling of the ballad, as in No. 146, "And wide they roamed through the world"; or it describes some action characteristic of the story, as in No. 140, the story of a girl rescued by her true love from an unwelcome suitor and carried off in a boat, with the refrain "Betake yourself to your oar"; or in No. 189, the story of how Ingerlill defended her honor against nine knights and slew them all, which begins at a dancing party and has the double refrain "Forget me not! . . . She stepped so stately." Occasionally it expresses a feeling that seems quite disconnected with the story, as in No. 199, which tells a rather gruesome story of a girl's device to escape from the attentions of an unwelcome lover by luring him into an ambush where her father hews off the lover's hand, and which has for its refrain "It is so fair in summer." Indeed, the range of matter in the refrains is very wide. But one form of refrain common in French and German balladry and familiar to us in English—the mere shout, the meaningless ejaculation, the series of nonsense syllables—is ruled out of genuine Danish balladry by Steenstrup. It is found, to be sure, in Grudtvig's collection; but Steenstrup argues at length and pretty successfully that it is either of foreign (German) origin or is a late corruption.

In verse form the Danish ballads are like our own, with a few marked differences. The rhyme is often imperfect, either in vowel or in consonant or in both. Double and triple rhyme, and even diphthong rhyme, are avoided. Alliteration occurs, but only as a spontaneous ornament; never, Steenstrup contends, as a verse-regulating principle. Attempts to derive the verse of the ballads either from the old Northern alliterative verse or from the Nibelungen stanza he discourages. There are three forms

of stanza: the two-line, four-beat stanza (always with refrain); the stanza of fours and threes in alternation, which we call the ballad stanza in English; and a third, a very pretty stanza of fours and twos with a striking effect of suspense in the short lines, which is found in some ten ballads, and which Steenstrup believes to be old. (Ker, *Scottish Historical Review*, Vol. I, p. 374, points that this is an old and frequent form of verse in the ballads of the Romance languages.) The two-line stanza, which is exceptional in English, is the prevailing and characteristic form of the Danish ballads.

Although many of the stories used in ballads are to be found the world over, and although many nations have what might be called ballads upon the same subjects, yet it is by no means true that ballads are everywhere alike. Even within the European ballad region marked out by Professor Ker—France, Northern Italy, Catalonia, Germany, Scandinavia, Britain—ballad style is by no means identical, as a little reading in the French or German ballads will show. But between Danish and English balladry there is practical identity of temper and style. Even with a very imperfect knowledge of the Danish language the English reader feels at once at home in *Danmarks Gamle Folkeviser*. It is therefore needless to repeat here Steenstrup's analysis of ballad style. In subject-matter there are two interesting differences: Danish has a much larger number of ballads dealing with national history in the Middle Ages than English has; and it has besides several that deal with the heroic figures of ancient Germanic story, with Sivard (Sigurd) and Brynhild, with Theodoric and Weland and Vidrik (Wudga). Some of these, no doubt, are importations from Germany in the later Middle Ages; but others represent native Scandinavian tradition as preserved for us in the Icelandic sagas. English balladry has kept no memory of these ancient heroes, though we know from *Beowulf* and the *Waldhere* fragments that they were once known in England. If we assume (as we hardly should) that the Arthur stories occupy an analogous position in English legend, even then we have in the few and inferior ballads dealing with Arthurian themes no adequate parallel to the ballads at the beginning of Grundtvig's collection.



For the very interesting and instructive chapter on "The Oldest Historical Ballads" in Steenstrup's original book, Professor Cox has substituted a later paper from the *Historisk Tidsskrift* on "Historical Truth in Ballad Poetry." It is part of a controversy between Steenstrup and A. D. Jørgensen upon the question whether a poet narrating contemporary events should or should not be expected to conform to the truth about those events so far as he knows it. Jørgensen had criticized Steenstrup's reasoning in *Vore Folkeviser* as to the age and source of certain historical ballads. Presumably Professor Cox omitted Steenstrup's original chapter on the ground that American readers would be little interested in the historical truth or untruth of ballad accounts of events in mediæval Denmark that they had never heard of. But they are likely to be even less interested in the last chapter of a controversy of which they do not know the premises. As a matter of fact, Steenstrup's original discussion of the historical ballads is the very opposite of dull or unintelligible. These ballads tell of Valdemar the Great, his queen Sophia, and his leman Tove; of Valdemar the Victorious and his two queens Dagmar and Bengard; of Marsk Stig and Erik Klipping; of Niels Ebbeson, the patriot hero of Danish balladry—famous and beloved ballads all of them. It is, it seems to me, the one part of the book that the American desirous of getting something like a real grasp of Danish balladry at second hand would least willingly do without. Certainly a controversial fragment of which the reader does not know the antecedents is no adequate substitute for it. The proper procedure would have been to translate the original chapter and then add as an appendix the discussion of Jørgensen's views—which would then be intelligible, and is interesting when it is understood.

In another point, also, the book leaves something to be desired. "Rien ne vieillit aussi vite qu'un ouvrage d'érudition." The year 1891 is a long while ago in ballad scholarship, and much water has run under the bridges since then, especially under the Danish bridge. The reader who takes up a volume on Danish balladry, even a translation, fresh from the press in 1914 has a right to expect that it will put him in touch with the scholarship of the subject up to that

time. It was natural enough for a Dane in 1891 to discuss the characteristics of Danish ballads with illustrations from German balladry and none from English; but the American reader now finds it strange that barely a single illustration is drawn from the countless parallels that suggest themselves between English and Danish ballads, parallels much truer and more significant than can be found in German, and that, except in Steenstrup's own 1907 article, Child's name is not mentioned. And if the reader has some little acquaintance with ballad study he will be at first puzzled and then something more than puzzled to read through a discussion of the relation of the ballad to the dance and find never a word about the *carole* or a hint that such men as Paris, Ker, and Thuren had ever studied balladry! I am not contending that Professor Cox should have revised his original and brought it down to date, though that is a wise, and is coming to be a frequent, practice in the translation of works of scholarship, and Professor Cox's own procedure in regard to the seventh chapter shows that his reverence for his author's text is somewhere this side idolatry. I mean only that somewhere in the book — in footnotes, in a bibliographical appendix, at the very least in the preface — the reader should have been apprised that later researches have put an entirely new face upon the problem of the origin of Danish ballads.\*

The rendering of the many stanzas from the ballads used by Steenstrup to illustrate and enforce his points is almost always good; simple, intelligible, without false archaisms, and yet in the ballad spirit. (The use of *boy* for *girl* or *child*, at the top of page 54, looks like an unconscious plagiarism from Autolycus.) But the same cannot be said of the translator's rendering of Steenstrup's prose. This is sometimes obscure and occasionally grotesque. Without consulting the original, one could hardly be sure, though one might suspect, that "the lyrical element in the ballads is seldom satisfied with pictorial images of nature's details" means that the lyrical impulse in the ballads seldom seeks expression in pictorial images. The following passage is quite

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\* There is a very brief but serviceable bibliography in T. F. Henderson's *The Ballad in Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 1912.

incomprehensible without the original: "How later times have changed the tone one can see for one's self by noting the way a ballad sings in the period of the Reformation. It is indeed in a ballad that we come across such a beginning as 'Will ye listen and hear, A ballad I'll sing to you.' In No. 172 . . . we read," etc. The second sentence should read: "It is precisely also in a ballad that begins 'Will ye listen,' " etc. On page 171 we read: "The eyes of the dying queen Dagmar are red as blood (No. 135, A 19); otherwise they are preferably likened to the red of roses"—from which one would infer that red eyes were considered a beauty in ballad heroines. Steenstrup wrote "Ellers er ved Rødt gjerne Rosens Lighed paakaldt" ("otherwise redness is preferably expressed by comparison to a rose").

But it is ungracious to pick flaws where gratitude is due. Professor Cox is a pioneer in a field that needs more laborers, and his work is good enough to encourage others to join him. He has put within the reach of American students a valuable specimen of the wealth of Scandinavian scholarship, and broken a road which one may hope will soon become a well-traveled highway.

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